

Influx of immigrants is 'without precedent'

Thomas Molloy

THE number of immigrants who settled in Ireland during the past decade is without precedent in the Western world, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) said yesterday.

Eastern Europeans made up over 4pc of the population by 2007 after being a negligible percentage of the population just five years earlier.

In Britain, the immigrant population rose by 2pc in the 30 years after 1960, it added.

Just over 10,000 Eastern Europeans lived in Ireland in 2002 while the figure was 200,000 by 2007. The influx was swelled by the Government's decision to allow Eastern Europeans to move here earlier than most other EU countries after the EU expanded in 2004.

Britain and Sweden were the only other countries to open their borders to all new EU citizens and many countries still have restrictions in place today.

"There's been an absolutely enormous, enormous inflow" but some were now returning, said the ESRI's Alan Barrett.

Recent figures suggest

around 24,000 left the country in the first few months of this year after losing their jobs and seeing certain unemployment benefits dry up, he added.

Dr Barrett said it was good for Ireland when the jobless immigrants returned home.

"I don't want to be politically incorrect but there are benefits during a downturn of people flowing outwards."

Educated

German economist Martin Kahanec, who gave a presentation at the ESRI, said Ireland's decision to open the borders early had ensured that the best educated immigrants came here, while countries that opened their borders later became home to poorly educated immigrants.

Eastern Europeans earn between 35pc and 40pc less than their Irish counterparts but have very high employment rates, with around 80pc of the total population working compared to 59pc of Irish nationals.

The flow of foreign workers had kept wages down here. They would be 7.8pc higher due to labour shortages if we had not accepted Eastern Europeans, Dr Barrett said.